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Getting our message across: Strategic reflections on modernizing statistical communication

Building trust in statistics through communications

Note by the Australian Bureau of Statistics

Summary

When it comes to the production and use of official statistics, trust is paramount. The data produced by national statistical offices provides the basis for critical decisions made by governments, businesses, communities and households. Now more than ever before in its 112-year history, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) is using communications to retain and build trust and manage issues effectively. Our facts are not alternative.

The document is presented to the Conference of European Statisticians' seminar on "Getting our message across: Strategic reflections on modernizing statistical communication", Session 2: "Communication crises - issue and reputation management" for discussion.

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I. Introduction

1. In today's interconnected world, trust is the glue that binds us together and communications plays a pivotal role in cementing that trust. You cannot buy trust – you have to earn it. However, once you have worked long and hard to earn it, trust is transitory and is easily lost. It takes a lot of effort to rebuild it.

2. According to the 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer, there has been a gradual decline in trust in institutions, such as business, government, media and NGOs, over the past five years. In this era of scepticism and cynicism it is important for us all to operate with openness, transparency and accountability.

3. Leaders need to lead, be upfront and out and about, with honesty, authenticity and integrity. The title of the address by David W. Kalisch, Australian Statistician, to the Conference of European Statisticians is: "Building trust in statistics through communications".

II. The ABS and its role

4. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has a trusted role in informing important decisions. The ABS is one of Australia's iconic national institutions, providing reliable economic, population, social and other information for more than 110 years.

5. The ABS is known for its independence, transparency and rigour. Every year, the ABS produces more than 500 statistical releases on Australia's society, its economy, population and environment.

6. These statistics are vital for decision making across government, business, research and not-for-profit sectors. The full range of the ABS's economic statistics guide fiscal, structural and monetary policy decisions. Our population numbers shape infrastructure and planning decisions, affect inter-government financial flows and our electoral redistributions. Our social statistics provide a window on society and how it is changing.

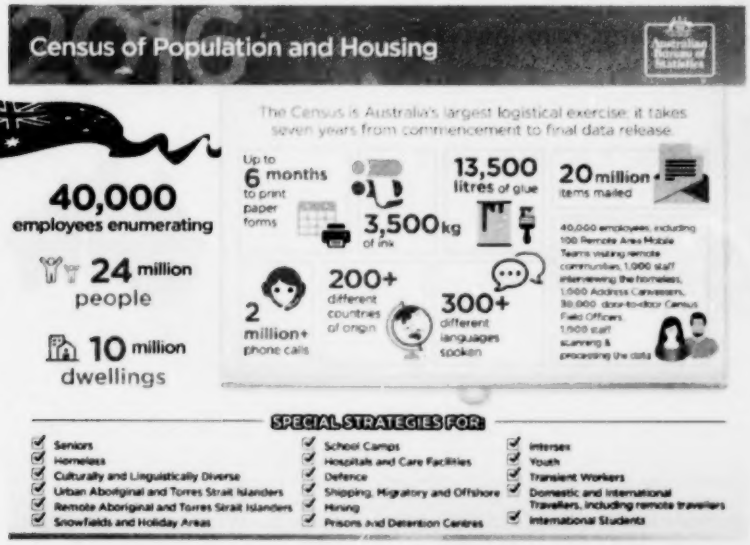
7. The ABS continues to produce these vital statistics in the face of many contemporary challenges. Australia's economy and society is becoming increasingly complex and more difficult to measure. At the same time, the ABS is operating in an increasingly stringent fiscal environment (the organisation has 20 per cent less funding and staffing compared to 10 years ago) and is in the process of replacing its fragile, ageing statistical infrastructure.

8. The combination of today's information age, where opportunities, expectations and technology are all moving at a considerably faster pace than previously, with reduced resources necessitates a more significant change to how the ABS needs to work.

III. 2016 Census

9. The ABS's flagship is the Census, conducted every five years as required under *Census and Statistics Act 1905*. Conducting the Census is always a big challenge. It is a major exercise with planning, development, testing, implementation and delivery spanning at least five years, with a further two years for data processing and statistical releases. The 2016 Census cost around $500 million, involved up to 40,000 field staff and, as with every Census, included complex delivery models for different population groups, such as Indigenous, remote, homeless and elderly.

Figure 1
2016 Census of Population and Housing


Census of Population and Housing
40,000
employees enumerating
24 million
people
10 million
dwellings
The Census is Australia's largest logistical exercise: it takes seven years from commencement to final data release.
Up to 6 months to print paper forms
3,500kg of ink
13,500 litres of glue
20 million+ items mailed
40,000 employees, including 100 Remote Area Mobile Teams visiting remote communities, 1,000 staff interviewing the homeless, 1,000 Address Canvassers, 30,000 door-to-door Census Field Officers, 1,500 staff scanning & processing the data
2 million+ phone calls
200+ different countries of origin
300+ different languages spoken
SPECIAL STRATEGIES FOR:
Seniors
Homeless
Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
Urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders
Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders
Snowfields and Holiday Areas
School Camps
Hospitals and Care Facilities
Defence
Shipping, Migratory and Offshore
Mining
Prisons and Detention Centres
Intersex
Youth
Transient Workers
Domestic and International Travellers, including remote travellers
International Students

10. The 2016 Census signalled a major change to the way the Census was conducted, with the shift from paper forms to online submissions as the primary collection method. Australia's first "digital first" strategy, which was agreed to in 2012, made it easier and faster for the ABS to process and produce a higher quality data set.

11. It was also more efficient and consistent with public expectations of dealing with government through accessible digital means.

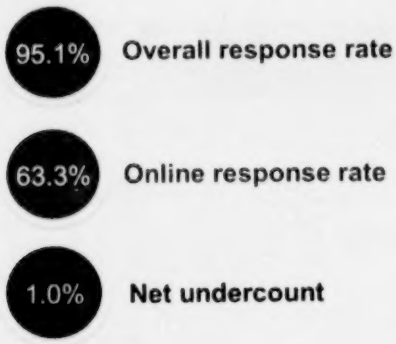
12. Many aspects of the 2016 Census were managed well, however, some key issues were not. The ABS Census website was taken offline as a precaution.

- Three reasons why the website was taken offline – distributed denial of service, IBM hardware failure, monitoring information suggested that data had been transferred out of the ABS without authorisation;
- The next two days were used to ensure the Census system as robust as possible before it is put back up for public to use.

13. This generated all sorts of media headlines and was widely portrayed on social media as "#CensusFail" and headlines of: "Worst Census ever".

14. As the key measures below show, the ABS delivered quality Census data. Even with the on-line data collection system out for nearly two days from 9 August during an eight-week collection period, the 2016 Census achieved an 80 per cent increase in the online response rate compared to 2011.

Figure 2
Census success



15. The 2016 Census did not fail; however, the ABS's reputation took a hit – that is undeniable.

16. If trust is the currency for organisations, it is fair to say that this had sharply depreciated for the ABS. In August 2016, the proportion of people who thought the Census had failed was 47 per cent. Most recent testing put it at about 20 per cent.

17. Data shows the community's attitudes and reactions to the 2016 Census at the height of the media frenzy in the lead-up to Census night and how the tone shifted in the months following the first release of Census information:

Table 1
Social media barometer

Social media attitudes	Feb-August 2016	Post 1st data release June 2017	Post 2nd release, October 2017
Favourable	23.4 per cent	13.2 per cent	73 per cent
Neutral	23 per cent	57.6 per cent	14.5 per cent
Unfavourable	54 per cent	29 per cent	12.5 per cent

18. Further recent testing of the community's trust in the ABS shows that it is back to usual levels with nearly 90 per cent of respondents trust the ABS to deliver high-quality, reliable statistics for Australia.

19. In hindsight there were problems with the ABS's communications strategy for the 2016 Census:

- The organisation underestimated the communications challenge, did not allocate enough money or time to the communications program and communications campaigns, and needed to be more agile to respond to emerging challenges;
- The ABS could have communicated more clearly at an earlier stage with those concerned about privacy issues on why it was collecting and then using names and addresses of respondents to the Census;
- The ABS needed to work with the changing nature of traditional media, which is impacted by technology shifts and compressed time and resources. As an

organisation ABS needed to be better prepared and public communications need to be implemented in minutes and not hours during such a challenging time; and

- In a world of many "experts", who can gain prominence on TV, radio or social media, contrary community claims get as much attention as evidence from official sources. However, in this contemporary environment there are also new communications approaches we can and should use to get perspectives out.

IV. Rebuilding community trust

20. It was critically important for the ABS to rebuild community trust after the events of the 2016 Census and, as one of the lead data integrators for government, to meet community expectations.

21. Trust is like the markets – it takes the stairs up and the elevator down. The ABS was not going to waste a crisis and set about to rebuild public trust and prepare for the conduct of the 2021 Census to implement the lessons learned – many of them the hard way.

22. The lessons include: managing cyber risk more extensively; more extensive risk and issues management and being better prepared when issues are emerging; understanding the changing media, social media and political environment in which it operated.

23. Some of the key communications lessons that the ABS learned were:

(a) Be prepared. Plan and practice for things to go wrong, including identifying clear roles and responsibilities and agreeing to them up front with key players;

(b) Be transparent. Tell people what you are planning to do in detail. If things go wrong there is nothing to hide in terms of what you planned and why;

(c) When things go wrong – act quickly. Apologise, acknowledge what happened, and explain what action you are taking to remedy the situation;

(d) Consider your use of social media (when and how to use it) carefully. On sensitive issues the risk is often greater than the reward.

V. Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey

24. The ABS and its staff learned a great deal from the 2016 Census, and importantly learned this quickly, which it was then able to apply to the Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey.

25. On 9 August 2017, one year after the 2016 Census, the Australian Government issued a direction to the ABS to undertake the Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey (AMPLS). The ABS would be responsible for an extraordinary process asking adult Australians their views on marriage – a core institution of society. Leadership of the ABS was also only too aware that the ABS's reputation had suffered as a result of some process issues with the 2016 Census. The release of quality Census data during 2017, together with the conclusions of the Independent Assurance Panel, had served to restore some confidence. Could the Survey provide the hard-working and dedicated staff of the ABS with an avenue to further repair its reputation?

26. Another swift realisation was the sheer enormity of such an undertaking. The contentious nature of such an exercise, with heartfelt views across the community, would

require the ABS to operate sensitively in a highly emotional and potentially divisive environment.

27. Although the ABS conducts many statistical collections, including some very large scale, the Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey was unique. It was designed and conducted in fewer than 100 days and comprised of a single question asked of more than 16 million eligible Australians. To put this in perspective, preparations for the ABS's Census start more than five years before the Census survey; planning for the Marriage Law Postal Survey started on 8 August with many processes settled in short time frames with results announced in fewer than 100 days. It was the biggest single mail-out in Australia with around 30 million items handled by the national postal service, Australia Post.

28. Another element of the challenge was the need to continue to deliver on "business as usual". There was no scope to drop the ball on other key economic, population, social and environmental statistics, including those relating to the labour force, inflation and national balance of payments. Through this period, the ABS issued 163 statistical releases that dealt with issues other than the postal survey from 8 August to 15 November. The bottom line was: it gave the ABS a chance to put into practice what it had learned the hard way from the 2016 Census.

29. It was a unique challenge because of:

- Extremely short timeframes;
- High levels of political engagement and expectation;
- Strong media and community interest in a very politicised and strongly debated issue;
- High levels of priority given to the AMLPS by the ABS, and strong support from across Government;
- Few budget and resource constraints;
- The relatively close proximity to first data release from the 2016 Census and the timing at a low point in the Census cycle;
- Strong focus on risk and issues management. The AMLPS marked the first time that the ABS – in partnership with Amazon Web Services (AWS) – employed cloud-based solutions to collect and publish data.

VI. How was it achieved?

30. A designated taskforce was set up immediately following the Government's direction to the ABS to undertake the AMLPS. At its peak the Taskforce was just under 500 staff.

31. The survey was a challenge to the ABS given the tight deadline to deliver. The organisation had to find new and innovative ways to work that maximised the delivery of value to the public. The taskforce applied agile methodologies in pragmatic ways to develop systems and quickly adapt to meet the survey's needs.

32. The organisation implemented the most efficient and effective methods of conveying information to and within teams. Stand-up meetings visualising work through Kanban boards created a sense of momentum and shared purpose. The board made it easier to manage the allocation of rapidly evolving tasks.

33. Good decisions were made quickly and the taskforce created an atmosphere where new ideas were able to flourish. Staff were highly motivated and regularly celebrated success, which created a sense of community. They worked extremely hard but found it satisfying and rewarding. The very high levels of internal support were fundamental to the success of the AMLPS.

VII. Key elements from a communications perspective

A. Design of forms

34. The ABS engaged behavioural economists to work with the taskforce communications team to develop all AMLPS materials, including the survey form, letter and materials for specific audiences, such as those living overseas.

35. The materials focused on what the reader needed to do and when they needed to do it. For example, features included the messaging on the envelope stating: "Your Australian Marriage Law Survey is inside" and instructions on the survey form to, "Put the envelope in the mail… today if you can!"

36. Testing showed that this approach was better than more traditional ABS approaches of focusing on a particular deadline.

37. Further, the form asked people to clearly mark one box and the ABS accepted any mark (instead of its usual approach of dictating what mark was required – i.e. a tick, cross or line). This ensured the form worked for all levels of comprehension and did not rule out responses due to non-compliance with the instructions. It made the process customer-centric and as easy as possible.

B. Website

38. The AMPLS website was a new user-friendly website developed solely for the AMPLS to ensure people could easily access simple, clear information, enabling them to request replacement forms and provide a mechanism for feedback.

39. This was a more user-centric approach allowing easier access to the information away from other irrelevant ABS website content. This was an exercise in deploying quickly and cheaply a dedicated website to support specific projects.

40. The ABS engaged early with a number of key IT and technology stakeholders in the Australian Public Service to seek support and assistance. These included: the Prime Minister's Cyber Security Advisor, the Australian Signals Directorate and the Digital Transformation Agency. In addition, we had good support from Amazon Web Services which assisted with the online form option that was used by people for whom post was not an option.

41. The marriage survey website went live on 9 September 2017 only four days after it had been requested. To manage delivery within the constrained time frame, assistance was provided to the ABS from Treasury, the Department of Finance, Acquia and Technocrat.

42. The website featured strong user-centred design and structure. It included comprehensive, plain English information about the survey process, how people could

participate, inclusive strategies for particular segments of the population and more. It was designed to be accessible on a variety of screen sizes, operating systems and internet browsers. Perhaps most importantly – especially in the context of the 2016 Census – it was reliable. A huge amount of testing was undertaken to ensure the website could cope with the significant volumes of traffic that were predicted.

43. On release day, the results were released at 10.04 a.m. with the statistics live on the website less than one minute later. At peak (10.07 a.m.) there were 279,000 requests per minute on the marriage survey website. This equates to approximately 21,000 page hits per minute. Over five minutes 20.5 Gigabytes of traffic engaged the website as Australia (85 per cent of the traffic) and the rest of the world (15 per cent of traffic) accessed the marriage survey data on the ABS website.

C. Focus on participation

44. The ABS knew that success would be defined by high participation in the voluntary survey, just how high was an unknown – 50 per cent was a rough guide for participation in voluntary surveys, but the aim was as high as possible.

45. One of the drivers for achieving a high participation rate was maximising community awareness of how to take part. Media coverage was driving high awareness that the survey was being conducted, however, the ABS needed to add to this awareness on how to participate.

46. A three-stage communications campaign was designed with very clear messages that were delivered in print, social media, radio and TV.

47. Although it was a national survey, the ABS created tailored information for specific groups in the community to ensure they were aware of a range of measures to help them participate.

48. The ABS engaged early and proactively with community organisations and other interested parties to develop a suite of "Inclusion Strategies" to cater for the needs of people in aged-care facilities; people with a disability, injury or illness; people who could not access mail or living in remote areas with less frequent mail services; people experiencing homelessness; and people from multicultural backgrounds.

49. The ABS Taskforce deliberately adopted a calm, neutral and impartial tone for all AMLPS media and communications, given public sensitivities around the topic and the decision to conduct a survey.

50. This was in contrast to the 2016 Census campaign, which used social media extensively and adopted a more active "hearts and mind" approach designed to get the public excited and engaged in the Census.

51. But the tone of the AMLPS did not mean the communications campaign lacked creativity. It had a strong focus on making information clear and visual and the ABS developed infographics and interactive maps that were used in social and traditional media. The AMLPS advertising campaign used social media and digital advertising – this was important for targeting young people and Australians living overseas.

52. The overall aim was to push service delivery to the website and information lines, restrict the volume of conversation about the survey process and present a neutral position because it was important that the ABS been seen as impartial in its communications.

53. The ABS used tools to monitor community sentiment about the survey and evaluate communications. It also allowed for monitoring and interception of misinformation and to identify key influencers that the ABS could work with.

D. Privacy

54. Privacy and security were paramount in the survey. The ABS placed the highest importance on the protection and confidentiality and the postal survey used a unique code to ensure that no one's details were seen or stored with their survey response.

55. This led to a "privacy-by-design" approach to the survey with a range of measures to minimise risks around collection, use, access and disclosure of personal information. At the end of the survey the ABS destroyed all 12.7 million paper and electronic responses.

56. The ABS undertook extensive and comprehensive quality assurance in the running of the AMLPS to promote community confidence and confidence in the design, implementation and execution of the survey. The community expected the ABS to ensure that the survey had plebiscite-like measures to assure its integrity, including independent assurance of quality controls.

"The ABS has taken a strong 'privacy by design' approach to protecting the privacy of Australians in designing the Survey. I am satisfied with the range of privacy measures that the ABS has embedded into the design of the Survey and supporting functions. I am also satisfied that the mitigation strategies and response plans are effective and appropriate in the context of the Survey."

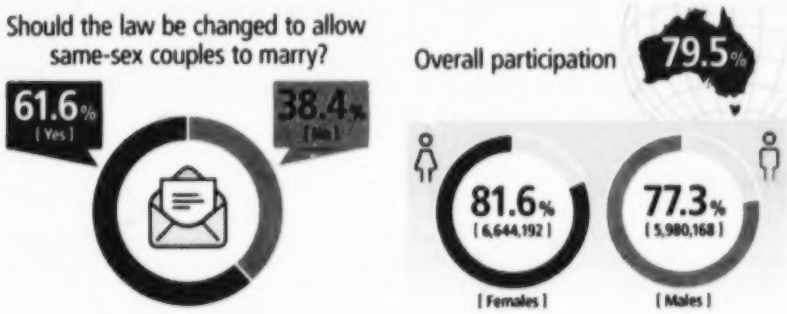
> Malcolm Compton AM, Managing Director, Information Integrity Solutions Pty Ltd; Privacy Commissioner of Australia 1999-2004

E. Third party endorsements and partnerships

57. Instead of trying to explain complex issues, reassure the public and rely on a "trust us" stance, the ABS engaged with a range of experts, including independent auditors, the former Australian Privacy Commissioner and Government security professionals, to either make public statements in advance on key issues or be ready to speak on our behalf when required.

58. Within hours of the announcement of the Survey, the ABS engaged with key stakeholders on design and to communicate the importance of working together. These partnerships included representatives of older Australians, multicultural communities, and yes/no campaigners to create direct contacts and encourage them to raise issues with us directly and not the media. This reduced their readiness to criticise and reduced any misinformation.

Figure 3
The results



59. Some in the media dubbed the AMLPS, "Bigger than Brexit" because of the survey's participation rate of 79.5 per cent. By way of comparison, the Brexit vote in 2016 in the United Kingdom had a turnout of 72.2 per cent and Ireland's 2015 referendum on same-sex marriage had 60.5 per cent of eligible voters participate.

60. Australia's Parliament legislated for marriage equality on 7 December 2017 and a month later on 9 January 2018 same-sex wedding ceremonies were held.

61. The Australian National University's Social Research Centre did an online and telephone survey that asked respondents to rank events that had the biggest impact on their lives. It found that Australia's same-sex marriage postal survey was regarded as having the greatest impact on the country. Even though this survey was conducted shortly after the Marriage Law Postal Survey and would have been fresh in respondents' minds, it nevertheless shows the impact it had on the community and how important Australians rated this issue.

VIII. Conclusion

62. The ABS operates in a fast-moving information age where opportunities, expectations and technology are all moving at a considerably faster pace than in the past.

63. Data agencies like the ABS need to navigate this more complex contemporary environment where there is reduced public confidence in government and where all information is questioned, even official statistics.

64. Although the ABS's reputation took a hit in 2016, it recovered in 2017. The Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey was a challenge – the ABS was not expecting it until it came. It was intense for those involved and for those across the ABS who gave up staff and backfilled positions.

65. The Survey was a whole-of-ABS effort, delivered to a standard that exceeded the community's and the Government's expectations and helped to rebuild our traditionally high levels of trust.

66. The bottom line is this: expect the unexpected. In this complex and fast-moving world we are all going to get thrown the occasional curve ball. Complexity and uncertainty are the new normal for modern statistical organisations.

67. Effective communication is critical in ensuring our organisations can respond well to this change and ambiguity, maintaining community trust and ultimately meeting our purpose to provide reliable information for the public good.